

# Great Plains Rat Snake Basic Information and Care Requirements

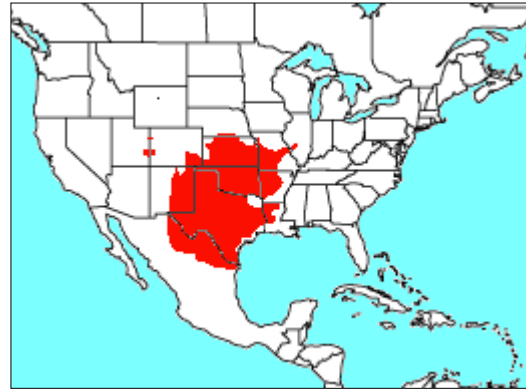
(Also known as: Emory's Rat Snake)

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**Introduction:** Rat snakes have been favorites with snake enthusiasts for some time. Unlike their Eastern relative, the corn snake, this snake has brownish splotches outlined in black, with a light to dark grey background. It has been proposed to divide the GP rat snake into the Southern Plains Rat Snake (lighter colors) and the Northern Plains Rat Snake (darker colors). These rat snakes are generally docile when handled properly. In the wild this snake can spend a lot of time in trees looking for food. It is important to note that in some states within the United States you must have a permit or license to own one of these snakes. **It is a protected species in Colorado and Illinois.**



## Basic Information:

**Scientific Name** – *Elaphe guttata emoryi*  
*E. emoryi meahllmorum* (Southern Plains)

Proposed: *E. emoryi emoryi* (Northern Plains) and

**Natural Habitat** – Prefers woodland or shrubland areas, spending a lot of time in trees searching for food. Great plains rat snakes range from Southern Illinois to Western Louisiana, then across Missouri through almost all of Texas and Oklahoma, and parts of Colorado, New Mexico, Mexico and an isolated spot in Colorado/Utah.

**Size** – averages are around 2 - 3.5 feet

**Lifespan** – expect 15 - 20 years for a healthy snake in captivity

**Diet** – carnivorous - Feed twice weekly as babies or juveniles, then weekly as adults. Feed appropriately sized mice, rats. The prey shouldn't be larger than 1 and ½ the widest part of the snake. Small snakes can also be offered small lizards and tree frogs (NOT toads). Rat snakes do not eat insects. Hatchlings are not likely to eat for about a week, until their first shed. They are born with a fat reserve. 1-5 day old pinkie mouse is ideal)When feeding hatchlings for the first time, be careful not to put the food item on top of the snake or inside of the hide with it. This may frighten the snake and it will not eat. Frozen and thawed rodents are the easiest to deal with. You can purchase them at most shops which sell reptiles or mail-order them. You can defrost them in freezer bags placed in warm water or at room temperature. We do not recommend using a microwave because of hot spots and frozen spots remaining inside of the animal which could hurt your pet. If you feed live prey, do not leave the prey animal in with the snake unobserved. Mice and rats can attack and severely injure a snake which doesn't eat right away.

Do not try to feed your snake "the biggest thing it will eat!" This can lead to regurgitation and other issues. Smaller meals more often are better than single large meals. Do not handle the snake for at least a day after feeding. Always provide constant access to fresh, clean water.

**Housing** – The rule here is "the bigger, the better." Ideally, you should provide an enclosure at least 36"L X 18"W X 20"H. A 30 gallon tank will do alright for a single adult. The idea is to provide your animal with enough room to stretch out, and for a temperature range within its environment. You will need to provide a water dish large enough for the entire snake to soak in; some form of hiding space such as cork bark or a hide box, and some climbing branches will be readily utilized by these snakes. You can use paper, outdoor carpeting, cypress or aspen mulch, even potting soil that does not contain perlite as a substrate. Irregardless of what substrate you use, it is vital that you keep it clean.

### **Lighting and Heating:**

Your snake will need a source of daytime lighting which can be provided by using a reptile daytime spot light. This will also provide a source of heat and a basking spot. You may also wish to provide a nighttime bulb or ceramic heater to maintain the temperature at night without the bright light which would disturb the snake at night. **Do not use a white light at night!** You should provide an overall enclosure temperature of 72-82°F with a basking spot around 90°F. Night time temperatures can drop to ~64-68°F. Snakes do not require UV lighting like most other reptiles, but the use of one could give the snake a more natural setting and allow for more natural behaviors. If using light bulbs for heat, be sure that they are placed in such a way that the snake cannot contact any hot surfaces. You can also provide heat through under tank heaters and specialty reptile heating platforms. Be sure to use a thermoregulator to allow for better control over the temperature. The heated area does need to be large enough for the entire snake to bask. A small spot of heat will not be enough for a large snake.

**Humidity:** Rat snake requires a moderate relative humidity around 40-60%. Maintaining this level of humidity will help to avoid illnesses and also aid the snake in shedding properly. This can be done by maintaining a dish of clean water in the cage at all times. If the snake spends a lot of time soaking, the air is probably too dry and you may need to consider occasionally misting the cage. When the snake is shedding, you can provide a hide box with a layer of moist (not soggy!) mulch or long fiber sphagnum moss in it. This will help with the shedding process.

**Brumation** - Your rat snake can be allowed to brumate from 2 – 4 months each year. Brumation is not the same thing as hibernation in mammals, but is similar in concept. Brumation is sometimes referred to as a winter cool-down. Your rat snake will brumate at temperatures from 41-59°F. Please see our [guide to brumation of snakes](#) for detailed information.

### **Choosing a snake and acclimatizing it to your home:**

When choosing a pet, look for an individual that is active and responsive to handling, and which feels strong and muscular. Animals which show loose folds of skin along the body (dehydration); lumps along the body; signs of external parasites such as ticks or mites (look closely around the mouth, eyes, and cloaca); signs of runny or bloody feces in the tank (internal parasites), any discharge of mucus from the mouth, nose, or eyes may be unhealthy. If possible, find out if the animal is eating well, and what it has been fed.

It is not unusual for a snake to refuse to feed immediately when you change its environment. Provide a good set up, and give it some time to adjust to its new home. Try not to handle it or overly disturb it for about two weeks, then how it responds to contact and an offering of food. A visit to a veterinarian is recommended for a fecal exam to detect internal parasites.

### **Sources:**

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**For a more detailed information, please read our advanced care sheets at [www.grare.org/library/care.html](http://www.grare.org/library/care.html)**